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ABSTRACT

A brief review of the literature concerning the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement precedes a discussion of the perceptual and operational models of self-concept as they relate to classroom teaching. It is suggested that the differentiated "operational" model of definition and instrumentation of self-concept best meets the needs of students. This model is based on the operational definition that "self-concept is an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors," and is directed toward better understanding of school-related and non-school-related tasks that confront students. It is also suggested that the understanding that results from this model makes it easier for teachers to design appropriate and effective Individualized Education Programs and reduce the use of labels and categories for students. (CB)

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Understanding the Operational Model of Self-concept: An Educational Approach

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Abstract

Educational factors such as self-concept and academic achievement have consistently been of great interest to parents, teachers, and administrators. Divergent views of the self-concept of students have led to the proliferation of constructs, instruments, and interpretations. The perceptual notion that "self-concept is an undifferentiated and interrelated perceptions of the self" puts teachers in precarious positions when designing Individualized Education Programs for their students. The operational definition that "self-concept is an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors" present proper understanding of school-related and non-school-related tasks which confront students. In addition, such an understanding makes it easier to design Individualized Education Programs, and reduce labels/categorizations which are prevalent in education today. The authors have discussed both perceptual and operational models of self-concept as they relate to teaching, and provided empirical findings to support the operational notion.

The worth of any classroom program is determined by how well students who come in contact with the program perform. As a result, educational factors such as self-concept and academic achievement have continuously been of great interest to parents, teachers, and administrators. Historically, teachers have perceived that there is a relationship between how students feel about themselves and how they perform in the classroom. They also noted that if a student feels good about him/herself that student is usually a good student who achieves well academically. Some researchers have also postulated that deficiency in self concept may be a significant determinant of underachievement just as the converse seems to be true for positive self-concept and high achievement (Bruck and Bodwin, 1962). Thus, it comes as no surprise that underachievements of some Hispanics, Blacks, women, and the handicapped have been attributed to their relatively inferior self-perceptions. For example, visually impaired students have been erroneously perceived to have "low" self-concept because of their inability to see and form concepts. As a consequence, the following pedagogical questions have frequently surfaced. Which model of self-concept is more applicable to the classroom teacher and his/her students? How can the teacher effectively manage and direct the self-concept of the student to a functional and "desirable" educational end?

What, then, is the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement? In this paper, the authors have responded to the above questions by (a) discussing the perceptual and operational models of self-concept as they relate to classroom teaching, and (b) providing teachers with answers based on empirical studies and findings.

Perceptual Model of Self-Concept

Traditionally, self-concept is viewed as undifferentiated and highly interrelated perceptions of the self (Kinch, 1963; Purkey, 1970; Rogers, 1951; Snygg & Combs, 1949). This view which has come to be known as the "perceptual or global model of self-concept" simply describes how one sees or perceives him/herself. This conceptualization also assumes that one's self-perceptions are fully developed before he/she enters the classroom for the first time. As Canfield and Wells (1976) pointed out:

> By the time a child reaches school age his self-concept is well formed and his reactions to learning, to school failure and success and to physical, social and emotional climate of the classroom will be determined by the beliefs and attitudes he has about himself. (p. 3)

The above supposition indicates that a change in self-concept is likely to affect a wide range of behaviors. When one aspect of the student's self-concept is affected, there is a "ripple" effect in his/her entire self-concept. If the perceptual model of self-concept is to be applied in the classroom, it will

require the involvement of the teacher with the school and home aspects of the student's life. Apparently, such a practice will place the teacher in a rather precarious position of encouraging classroom discussion of aspects of the child's life which are outside the primary domain of the school's delegated responsibility (Muller, Chambliss, and Muller, 1982). Moreover, this practice encourages student labeling or categorization which hamper classroom learning and/or functional learning outcomes. It becomes educationally unproductive to use the perceptual conceptualization of self-concept in regular, special, or mainstreamed classrooms, especially in designing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for school children.

Operational Model of Self-Concept

To reduce problems of misunderstanding and confrontation between parents and teachers in the classroom, some theorists developed an alternate view of self-concept. Helper (1955), Marsh, Parker, & Barnes (1985), Marsh & Smith (1986), Muller (1978), and Shavelson, Bolus, and Keasling (1980) attempted to approach self-concept from a more operational perspective. From this theoritical framework, self-concept is defined as an individual's repertoire of self-descriptive behaviors. A student's self-descriptions can be accurate or inaccurate, consistent or contradictory, extensive or limited, covert or overt, and sometimes change as the context changes. Muller,

Chambliss, and Muller (1982) argued that "self-descriptive behaviors quantified in terms of positiveness should, when factor analyzed yield a number of discrete, internally consistent factors" (p. 7). Operationally, self-concept has three subsets (self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal), which can be measured in the areas of physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness (Muller, Larned, Leonetti, & Muller, 1984; 1986). It appears that dividing the self-concept of the student into such discrete construct areas has several educational implications (Obiakor, 1986a, Obiakor, Muller, & Stile, 1987). As Muller, Chambliss, and Muller (1982) explained:

> ...Instructional strategies designed to alter self-concept can be focused on those aspects of self-concept directly relevent to the school. This eliminates the need to intrude into the personal or family aspects of the student's life. A related implication is that programs designed to impact on self-concept in one are (e.g. peer relations) are not likely to impact on self-concept in other ares (e.g. academics). Our own work convinced us that for the majority of students, effective classroom management of self-concept can be accomplished by limiting our efforts to the school life of the child. (p. 9)

Empirical Studies

It is easy to find in the literature the notion that raising the positiveness of self-concept of the learner will ennance his or her ability to gain from educational programs. While this notion is extremely popular, there is virtually little or no

research evidence to support its validity (Muller, Chambliss & Muller, 1983).

However, the extensive work done by Muller et al. has shone more light on the importance of self-concept. Lane and Muller (1977) identified sixty fifth-graders with low academic self-concepts and randomly assigned each to one of three research groups. They found that positiveness of self-concept was raised easily, but failed to indicate that such a change was associated with a change in the achievement-related behavior. In a laboratory setting, Sharp and Muller (1978) gave false aptitude test results to college students which led them to believe they were either extremely capable or incapable of learning a foreign language. A group received no information relative to ability. They found that simply raising the positiveness of self-concept may not result in enhanced school learnings. Also, they discovered that students who had their self-concepts lowered through supportive feedback learned faster than those who had their self-concepts lowered through judgmental presentation of negative information. Larned and Muller (1979) examined the positiveness of self-concept (self-knowledge and self-esteem) in students from grades 1-9. They assessed self-concept using the following four school-ralated areas: physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. They found that academic success and school adaptiveness declined across

grades, while the areas representing the less formal aspects of the school experience (physical maturity and peer relations) remained constant.

Mayhall (1981) examined the relationships between level of positiveness of reading self-knowledge, actual reading ability and what the child selected to read when instructed to pick something which was of appropriate difficulty. He discovered that students were frequently inaccurate in their self-knowledge or achievement. In other words, students were not using their self-concepts in academic decision-making. Velasco-Barraza and Muller (1982) confirmed previous findings in their investigation of self-concepts of students from Chile, Mexico, and the United States of America. They found that school experiences had similar effects on the self-concepts of children irrespective of the children's culture or nationality. Frazier (1983) used the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory to study the relationship of received grade discrepancy to academic achievement and self-concept. He found that "an unrealistically low positiveness of self-knowledge might be expected to facilitate underestimation of a grade by a student" (p.4). Alawiye (1986) reaffirmed Velasco-Barraza and Muller's (1982) finding in his study of the self-concepts of Ghanaian and Gambian school children. The remarkable significance of this study is that school experiences seem to affect children of different nationalities in similar ways,

Obiakor (1986b) compared the development of self-concept in visually impaired and normally sighted individuals, using the General and Visually Impaired Forms of the Student's Self-Assesment Inventory (Muller, Larned, Leonetti, & Muller, 1984; 1986). Normally sighted subjects (229) were tested from three randomly selected schools in the Gadsden Independent School District of New Mexico. Visually impaired subjects (61) were tested from New Mexico School for the Visually Handicapped and three randomly selected state schools for the visually impaired. The results of this study indicated that (a) there are only minor differences in the self-concepts of the three groups; (b) since the visually impaired maintained higher scores in some instances, the perceptual notion that the visually impaired have low self-concept was not supported; (c) self-concept is area-specific in nature for normally sighted and visually impaired students at different grade levels; and (d) school experience seems to affect normally sighted and visually impaired students in similar ways.

The above investigations have shown that self-concept is and will continue to be an important phenomenon in present and future educational programs. While the knowledge of what is "accurate" or "inacurate" self-concept is not the panacea to solving all the child's social problems in the classroom, such a knowledge will enable the teacher to know how to realistically deal with his or her students.

From the studies cited above, the following discoveries were made:

1. The comparisons used control groups.
2. The normative samples of the measurement tools were not used.
3. The authors of the Student's Self-Assessment Inventory defined self-concept. However, self-concept was not defined in the Tennessee Self-concept Scale or the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale.
4. It appears that the definitions are directly related to the measurement instrument. There is operational clarity.
5. The studies made self-concept a relevant educational concern.
6. The studies viewed self-concept from an operational perspective--There was a differentiation of the school-related behaviors and non-school-related behaviors. This makes it easy to write an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) that entails specificity. The more specific the problem, the easier the solution.

Conclusion

The authors have suggested that the differentiated "operational" model of definition and instrumentation of self-concept best meets the needs of students. The measure of self-

concept is identifiable and has objectivly describeable characteristics. Muller, Chambliss, and Muller (1983) have operationally argued that "it is not possible to assess the accuracy of the statement, "I earn good grades in school" (p. 9). Since self-concept may be affected by situational factors, measurement should take place in a context which is similar to the context which will be operating at the time the estimate of self-concept is to be used.

It is important to note that most standardized instruments which utilize self-description qualify the observed self-descriptions in terms of positiveness. Those self-descriptives which reflect the social ideal of the dominant society are scored as positive and those which are at odds are scored as negative. Contrarily, self-concept scores which reflect simple positiveness appear to pose interpretative difficulties and do not provide adequate information for proper utilization of self-concept test results. In both short and long runs, the utility of an instrument is the primary concern of educators. The identification of school-related behaviors and the achievement of "functional" self-concept are critical goal-directed educational ingredients.

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